



Milk's nutritional value debated as we consume more

by Anita Manning, Special for USA TODAYUpdated 9/17/2012 6:42 PM

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Consider a glass of milk.

Familiar, safe, evoking childhood memories of dunking cookies or cafeteria lunches with school friends. Cool, refreshing and good for you.

Maybe. While some consider milk a nutritional powerhouse, others see it as unnecessary for good health and question the rationale behind some government-related programs that try to help the marketing of milk.

"When I was growing up, drinking milk at every meal, I had a chronic upset stomach," cookbook author Mark Bittman wrote in his *New York Times* blog in July. As a teenager, that worsened into chronic heartburn and acid reflux, which led to a dependence on medications and a series of attempts to relieve his esophagus with other remedies.

MORE: [Alternatives to milk abound in supermarkets](#)

Finally, his doctor advised him to see if eliminating certain foods from his diet would help. So, as an experiment, he tried cutting out dairy products and 24 hours later, "my heartburn was gone. Never, it seems, to return."

It has long been known that some people have trouble digesting cow's milk. The National Institutes of Health estimates about 30 million Americans have lactose intolerance, the inability to digest a type of sugar in milk. The condition is more common in people of Asian, African, Native American or Mediterranean ethnicity, and, while not dangerous, it can cause nausea, bloating, gas and diarrhea. Milk allergy, an immune system reaction that can cause hives, eczema and wheezing, as well as digestive problems, is thought to affect 2% to 5% of babies, though many outgrow it by age 3, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

While there are drawbacks for some, the nutritional benefits of milk are clear, says Ruth Frechman, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, formerly the American Dietetic Association. "Milk is a nutrient-dense beverage; it's relatively inexpensive and is an easy source of hydration," she says. It contains protein, calcium, vitamin D, phosphorus, potassium, vitamin B12 and other vitamins and minerals.

But its main nutrient, says Frechman, is calcium, "and most Americans are not getting the recommended amounts of calcium." Calcium is needed to build bone and teeth, help

Mark Steil, AP

A dairy farm near Atwater, Minn.

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muscles to contract, and improve nerve function, she says. It plays a role in blood clotting and the dilation and contraction of blood vessels, which affects blood pressure.

Robert Post, deputy director of the USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, says of the four nutrients that are of public health concern because Americans don't get enough of them -- calcium, potassium, vitamin D and fiber-- three are in dairy foods. (There's no fiber in milk.)

Susan Levin, director of nutrition education at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a non-profit that describes itself as promoting preventive medicine and advocates a vegetarian diet, questions the USDA's emphasis on dairy as a major food group.

Levin says there's more marketing than science behind dairy promotion. She points to the dairy checkoff program (www.dairycheckoff.com), established in the 1983 Dairy Act (the Dairy Production Stabilization Act). One of a number of similar programs funded by agricultural industries (beef, soybeans), it requires producers and importers of dairy products to pay fees that finance programs aimed at boosting sales of dairy products. It is administered by the Dairy Board, whose members are appointed by the secretary of Agriculture, and is monitored by the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service.

By its own estimate, the program has been successful: Annual consumption of milk and milk products has risen 15%, from 541 pounds per person in 1981 to an estimated 620 pounds today, most of it fueled by increased consumption of cheese and yogurt, says Joe Bavido, program spokesman.

Consumption of liquid milk, conversely, has been on the decline, says Vivien Godfrey, CEO of the Milk Processor Education Program, MilkPEP, creators of the national Got Milk? campaign. Americans drank nearly 2 gallons of milk less per person in 2009 than they did in 2000, down from 22.4 gallons per person to 20.6 gallons. It's not that Americans are drinking less overall, she says. It's that they've switched to other beverages, primarily bottled water.

"That's concerning, because milk is important in the diet," she says. It's nutritious and "very affordable," at about a quarter per 8-ounce glass.

Now, she says, "The challenge we're faced with is to steal market share back from other beverages, like bottled water." To that end, MilkPEP is launching new advertising campaigns, one aimed at encouraging people to drink milk at breakfast and another pitching chocolate milk to adult athletes -- marathoners, triathletes and others who work out hard -- as a tasty way to refuel after a workout.

But do we need milk? "Dairy products have been touted as absolutely essential to human health," Levin says, "but there really hasn't been any scientific evidence to support that claim." Some studies raise questions about the value of dairy foods in bone or heart health, and others suggest an increased risk of health problems, such as prostate cancer in men who drink a lot of milk, she says.

"To me it's irresponsible for the USDA to make it a mandatory food item served with (school) lunch," she says. "This is a beverage that could make, certainly minority kids, not feel good."

Nutritionist Gregory Miller, executive vice president of the National Dairy Council, says the preponderance of evidence is "quite good and clear in terms of the important role dairy can play in the diet to reduce chronic diseases."

He points to recommendations from the Surgeon General, the American Academy of Pediatrics and other medical authorities "all saying dairy should be part of the diet." Despite "one study here or there" that raises questions about the health benefits of dairy foods, he says, "Look at the total body of evidence out there."

The USDA's Post says that's what the agency did in developing its food guidelines. The policy is based on a thorough review of all the research, and is not influenced by

marketing or pressure groups, he says. "Everything is done to review the science," he says.

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Mike Kaye · Top Commenter

Why do they always try to apply things to people as all good or all bad? Some people don't have good reactions to milk and should not drink it. Others are fine with milk and get good things out of it. Let the people who want to drink it drink it, and the rest don't. Stop trying to define things for everyone the same as all good or all bad.

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Anne Corrao Peterson · Top Commenter · Stoneham High School

Seriously it's called lactose intolerant! This article is stupid!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 15 · September 17, 2012 at 4:21pm



Joseph Adams · University of Pennsylvania

I just think people should be informed, not bamboozled by the dairy industry's multi-million dollar ad campaign. People are going to eat and drink whatever they want, God bless them. But they might want to know the facts, like why they're obese, why they can't lose weight, why rates of diabetes and heart disease are skyrocketing, why cancer rates are many times higher in the U.S. than in societies whose dietary "choices" are not driven by the processed food industry (abetted by the U.S.D.A.). Obesity rates have doubled in the U.S. since 1980! For the first time in human history, two thirds of the population are obese or overweight. What changed is the food we eat, including way more cheese per capita, less fiber, and more processed food. It's your right to eat what you want, and to increase your risk of diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Enjoy! But let people know the facts.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 2 · September 18, 2012 at 7:21pm



William Chamberlain · Top Commenter

Mike Kaye try raw milk, I had problems with store milk. Organic raw milk has no effect on my body.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · September 21, 2012 at 7:51am



Donna Richardson · Top Commenter

One trouble with milk is that it needs price supports, because it's a lot easier to plant or not plant a field than to get rid of, then rebuild, a dairy herd. Not that this means there shouldn't be price supports--milk is an almost necessary staple of the northern European diet. And an awful lot of Americans evolved in northern Europe, still (that's why they can tolerate milk as adults).

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · September 17, 2012 at 2:42pm



Ray Gibson · Top Commenter

They might as well print a headline "The Dangers of Peanuts to Young Children" and use a story of a kid with a strong peanut allergy to scare people into thinking peanuts will kill them. Bottom line, if you're allergic, don't consume it!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 36 · September 17, 2012 at 3:44pm



Michael Schmid · Top Commenter · CEO & Founder at Ably Solutions

Milk is different though, it's actually 'not' that good for humans to drink it. It's female cow pus, it's pumped full of chemicals and people SHOULD be eating vegetables and fruit for their diets instead.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 20 · September 17, 2012 at 7:11pm



Sherry Gypsy Salzman · Top Commenter · Works at Professional Musician

Michael Schmid Cow pus ??? hardly ..its made ... like human breast milk for the developing calf/infant... your staement is very ignorant of the fact that that there are p[er]ople like myself=who cannot tolerate fruits and vegetables due to hereditary health issues and also cannot eat meat for protein. milk is a nealry perfect solution for many of us

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 16 · September 17, 2012 at 10:44pm



Johnathan Doe · Top Commenter · Univeristy of Oklahoma

Pus is a natural substance created in the immune response and it is protective. However, calling milk "pus" demonstrates an astounding ignorance of physiology. It's also very demeaning to women.

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Rusty Griswold · Top Commenter

Milk rocks. Mmmmmmm

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Dan Zeratsky · Top Commenter · Saint Xavier University

we are the only mammals that drink milk after infancy-----and we are the smart ones???????

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Susan Borden Van Wyen · Top Commenter · Central Arizona College

been drinking lots my whole life and was on the deans list for four straight years...sure didnt hurt my grades (fyi i took courses such as college algebra, not just classes for fun :)

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 6 · September 17, 2012 at 7:27pm



Jason Thomas · Top Commenter · Grand Valley State University

Do you know of another mammal smart enough to know how to harvest another mammals milk?

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Rick Trone

Susan Kilbey Just think how smart you'd be if you didn't drink milk.

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Lester Lewis

The other issue is the fat content of milk. If you drink it at all, I would stick to skim, as even 2% and 1% have a high fat content. The percentages are misleading, but only baboes need milk not adults. All of those nutrients can be added to your diet in other forms.

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Love Ends Foetus · West Side High School (Gary)

Cow's milk is to get a 90lb calf to 450lbs in 1 year.

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Joseph Adams · University of Pennsylvania

One of the reasons Americans are obese.

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Jay Rizoli · Top Commenter · Works at One Cup Norfolk

"Milk's nutritional value debated"

That's not news. They've been debating that for as long as I can remember.

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Lance Cole · Top Commenter · Quite a Few of Those Too

How about, if you like it, drink it. If you don't like it, don't drink it. By the way, if you don't drink it, don't cry about osteoporosis or brittle anything when you are 50. Don't cry when you have rickets. AND, most importantly, don't cost me out of my pocket when your medical bills from being a fool cost you.

Seriously, people, have you seen the scarecrows walking around lately that look like poster-

children for African starvation? Have you noticed, they think they look good at 3-percent body fat and on the lowest 10-percent BMI? Even though current medical studies are showing that overweight (not obese) is not detrimental to life-span at all.

Seriously...if you listen to the 'Prophets of Science' this much...you really can't ridicule the 'Prophets of Religion' at all...because BOTH are predominantly ERRONEOUS!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 3 · September 17, 2012 at 4:52pm



Dan Zeratsky · Top Commenter · Saint Xavier University

there is not any proof whatsoever that the consumption of milk prevents or improves any conditions. and rickets comes from the lack of vitamin c---there are a lot better sources for that than milk. besides keeping milk cold on long voyages was difficult during the columbus days.

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Erin Marie Ribo · Top Commenter

Actually, Dan, scurvy is the deficiency disease that you're thinking of in regards to lack of vitamin C. I will say this, though--fluid cow's milk is pushed too hard by pediatricians once a child is weaned from either formula or his mother's milk. There are plenty of other sources of calcium, protein and vitamin D that are woefully underconsumed by many Americans. Also (and this is directed towards Lance), while some current medical studies show that being overweight is not detrimental to lifespan, what your average person considers to be overweight can seriously influence one's quality of life and by extension, their medical bills in the long term. Osteoporosis is not necessarily prevented by milk consumption, either. It is strongly influenced by genetic background and can also be prevented to a degree by regular weight-bearing exercise, consumption of dark leafy vegetables and other calcium containing foods, moderate sunlight exposure and the taking of appropriate calcium supplements.

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Jean Beadle · Top Commenter

The main reason we need to ingest so much calcium is because highly acidic foods pull the calcium from our bones. And what are those foods?? Meat and dairy. I'll pass on the animal proteins and not worry a bit about my bones. I get plenty of calcium from the green leafy vegetables that I eat.

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Ed Reiman · Top Commenter · University of Survival

Mammal milk is 'designed' pretty much species specific. YES, some "cross-feeding" IS possible, but even good Veterinarians suggest NO cow's milk for any animal EXCEPT CAVES.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 4 · September 17, 2012 at 4:54pm



James A Springer · Apache Junction, Arizona

You are absolutely right. Cows milk is designed specifically for cows and not the pasteurized stuff we drink. If you feed pasteurized milk to a calf, it will die. Also realize the people who have the most problems with calcium deficiency are those in the western countries that consume the most dairy products. All you have to do is look at other animals, especially cows. They require more calcium than any other animal since they produce calcium rich milk. What do they eat??? Green vegetables; whole grains, hay and alfalfa. If you want to increase your calcium intake, eat green leafy vegetables. DUH

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 5 · September 17, 2012 at 8:53pm



Rob Sorensen · Southern Utah University

James A Springer, do some research. Pasteurized milk WILL NOT kill a calf, the opposite is true, they will be healthier and grow faster. We started feeding our calves pasteurized milk and have seen the results.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 4 · September 17, 2012 at 9:49pm



James A Springer · Apache Junction, Arizona

I have and they died.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · September 18, 2012 at 12:37am

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